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## WILLIAM BENBOW AND THE ORIGIN OF THE GENERAL STRIKE

RECENT scholarship has shown that the idea of the general strike as a means to political revolution did not originate with French syndicalism, but arose as an incident in the bitter struggle of the British workingman for economic and political power, during the Chartist period.<sup>1</sup> It has been established that the concept held an important place in Chartist ideology and, under the titles of the "Sacred Month" or "National Holiday," became for a time the central feature of the movement. The origin of the idea has generally been associated with one William Benbow.<sup>2</sup> A consideration of the very scanty biographical material available concerning Benbow is of interest, both because it throws some light upon an important if obscure actor in the events of that period, and because it gives a basis for estimating the extent to which he may be considered the real originator of the general strike idea.

William Benbow was born in 1784,<sup>3</sup> probably somewhere in the vicinity of Manchester.<sup>4</sup> At the age of twenty-four he had established himself as a non-conformist preacher,<sup>5</sup> apparently of the Quaker sect,<sup>6</sup> at Newton, a suburb of Man-

<sup>1</sup> It was apparently introduced to French workingmen by some English delegates to a congress of the First Internationale in 1866. Saulière, *La Grève Générale de Robert Owen, Bordeaux, 1913*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, London, 1920, vol. i, pp. 314-318; vol. ii, pp. 81 ff. West, *History of the Chartist Movement*, New York, 1920, pp. 68-70; Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, London, 1918, pp. 138 and 164, 165; Russel, *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, New York, 1919, p. 71, footnote. Beer's account is the most adequate, and has been largely drawn upon in this note.

<sup>3</sup> He was 56 years old when condemned for sedition at Chester in 1840. H. O. Assizes Book, 61/9 (Chester), April 10, 1840.

<sup>4</sup> He was in a suburb of Manchester in 1808 (cf. next note), and was in Manchester in 1817. Beer conjectures that he was born in London.

<sup>5</sup> He was preaching in a chapel at Newton when the roof of the parish church "fell in with a tremendous crash." Benbow, *Crimes of the Clergy*, London, 1823, p. 80. According to the *History of Newton Chapelry*, this event occurred on Sunday, May 1, 1808.

<sup>6</sup> He uses the Quaker idiom of "not holding communion with" a disreputable character, Benbow, loc. cit.; addresses his wife in a letter as "Thee," Benbow, *Censorship*

chester. It is probable that he was then earning a part of his living as a shoemaker; at all events this was the occupation he gave as his calling toward the end of his life.<sup>1</sup> By 1817 he had moved to Manchester, and had married. He was by this time an active worker in the radical movements then agitating northern England. He attended a meeting in the "Crown and Anchor" in London, as a "delegate"<sup>2</sup> and — according to the evidence of a government spy — was engaged in the manufacture and sale of pikes for use during armed insurrection.<sup>3</sup> During the excitement following the collapse of the so-called "Manchester Insurrection," and preceding the abortive Nottingham uprising, Benbow was arrested. Apparently the machinations of government spies, similar to those carried on by the notorious "Oliver," were partially responsible for Benbow's misfortune.<sup>4</sup> Benbow was taken to the Cold Bath Fields House of Correction in London, where, after an interview with Lord Sidmouth, in which the Home Secretary promised him a "fair trial," he was confined for several months. Eventually, he was (presumably) tried and released, perhaps under the pressure brought upon the authorities by the revelations concerning the government spy system, which had intervened between Benbow's arrest and release.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after his return to Manchester, Benbow put out his first publication — a pamphlet entitled, *Censorship Exposed*.<sup>6</sup> Besides two more or less personal letters to his wife, Benbow put in his pamphlet a long letter to Lord Sidmouth,

*Exposed*, Manchester, 1817, p. 6; and expresses strong abhorrence of war, Benbow, *Crimes of the Clergy*, pp. 224, 225.

<sup>1</sup> He was entered in the prison records as a shoemaker on the occasion of his third imprisonment. *Accounts and Papers, Gaols and Prisons*, London, 1840, vol. xxxviii, No. 600, p. 690.

<sup>2</sup> Hovell, *op. cit.*, p. 91, footnote.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136. The manufacture and sale of pikes to revolutionarily inclined workingmen was apparently an extensive and lucrative business during this period. Cf. General Napier's observations, quoted in West, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer*, London, 1919, pp. 350–362.

<sup>5</sup> Benbow, *Censorship Exposed*, *passim*; Hammond, *op. cit.*, pp. 353–371.

<sup>6</sup> The subtitle is "Letters Addressed to R. H. V. Sidmouth and Mrs. Benbow." The writer is indebted to Mr. G. D. H. Cole for a suggestion which led to the discovery of this pamphlet.

all dealing with the circumstances of his imprisonment, and all containing high-flown, rambling tirades against "tyranny" and "despotism." The grammar and spelling are crude, suggesting the work of a self-educated workman; but there is a remarkable vehemence and forcefulness, and a surprising richness of metaphor and allusion. The crudities drop out in later writings, while the good features of the style are further developed; the disjointed, unrestrained character, however, remains through all of Benbow's writing.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, the rigorous repressive policy pursued by the Liverpool Ministry damped the ardor of Benbow, as of others, for political "reform,"<sup>2</sup> and he turned his energies to another field of agitation, in a place where his former associations might not be known. The new scene of his endeavors was London, where, about 1821,<sup>3</sup> he undertook the serial publication of a large number of scandal-mongering anecdotes directed against the Church of England. Benbow himself published the work as a bound volume in 1823,<sup>4</sup> adding an appendix presenting a detailed tabulation of "plural" livings of established clergymen in Ireland, which must have taken a prodigious amount of work, and certainly not a little ability.<sup>5</sup> Whether for his utterances against the clergy or for some other reason, Benbow went to prison for a second time in 1821.<sup>6</sup>

The book bears the inscription of "Benbow, Printer and Publisher, Byron's Head, Castle Street, Leicester Square"; and a contemporary directory indicates that Benbow was a

<sup>1</sup> See question raised as to Benbow's complete sanity, below.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cross, History of England and Greater Britain, New York, 1914, pp. 869-872.

<sup>3</sup> One "article" is dated from King's Bench Prison, May 7, 1821.

<sup>4</sup> The evidence that it was serially published is inferential: different parts of the work are referred to as "articles"; the British Museum copy consists of different grades and sizes of paper.

<sup>5</sup> The author claims to have prepared it at the request of a member of Parliament, "who expressed the greatest anxiety to become qualified to bring the question before the House." He also speaks of a similar "simple equation of tithes" for livings of clergymen in England, prepared in 1817 possibly during his first imprisonment.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. third note above. Also Notes and Queries, London, 1876, 5th series, vol. vi, p. 329. That the imprisonment was probably due to Benbow's anti-clerical activities is suggested by the statement in the "Address" constituting a preface to the Crimes of the Clergy, that "We have suffered deeply from church oppression . . . and our person has been thrown into a dungeon."

bookseller as well as a publisher.<sup>1</sup> Other publications brought out by him from the "Byron's Head" included a reprint of Byron's "Don Juan,"<sup>2</sup> a number of "religious tracts" and a "periodical work in defense of the state,"<sup>3</sup> as well as parts of an unauthorized edition of Southey's revolutionary poem, "Wat Tyler."<sup>4</sup> The latter prompted a virulent open letter from Southey, directed at Benbow, in which his book-shop is called "one of those preparatory schools for the brothel and the gallows, where obscenity, sedition, and blasphemy are retailed in drams for the vulgar."<sup>5</sup> Benbow's next work, *A Scourge for the Laureate*, is a pamphlet issued in reply to Southey's attack, and is relatively restrained and dignified. The author sarcastically reminds Southey of his "apostasy" from the revolutionary fervor of his "Wat Tyler" to the lucrative conservatism of the laureateship; he also takes pains to insist upon his devotion to religion.

Benbow's next publication was his *Grand National Holiday*, in which his theory of the general strike was promulgated. It was published early in 1832.<sup>6</sup> There is uncertainty concerning the circumstances of Benbow's life at this time, but it is probable that he was supporting himself as a shoemaker,<sup>7</sup> and lodging-house keeper,<sup>8</sup> while giving a generous proportion of his time to agitation. It is possible that he was for a while proprietor of a Fleet Street coffee house.<sup>9</sup> What-

<sup>1</sup> Piggot's London Commercial Directory, London, 1823-24.

<sup>2</sup> London, 1822.

<sup>3</sup> Benbow, *A Scourge for the Laureate*, London, 1825 (?), pp. 16, 17.

<sup>4</sup> With William Carlie, according to Beer, op. cit., p. 315. The British Museum contains a copy of the poem published by Carlie about this time, but no reference to Benbow appears on its title pages.

<sup>5</sup> The letter appeared in the Courier for December 13, 1824, and is reprinted in part in Benbow, loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> "This day is published, price 2d, Benbow's *Grand National Holiday*," Poor Man's Guardian, January 28, 1832.

<sup>7</sup> What seems to be a reprint of his *Grand National Holiday*, is advertised in the Poor Man's Guardian for May 17, 1834, as "by a Journeyman Bootmaker."

<sup>8</sup> "All the lodgers' beds" were taken by a "taxgatherer." Tribune of the People, June 24, 1832.

<sup>9</sup> This is the conclusion drawn by Beer, op. cit., p. 315, and by West, op. cit., p. 68, from the fact that the *Grand National Holiday* is written from "The Commercial Coffee House, 205 Fleet Street," but, in view of the fact that the *Tribune of the People*, published by Benbow later in the same year, is published from "The Institute on Theobald's Road," this evidence is not conclusive. It should be remembered that, as early as 1664, it was the practice to address matter for publication from one or another coffee

ever his occupation, he was one of the most radical and most influential members of the National Union of Workingmen, called by Beer "the birthplace of Chartism."<sup>1</sup> This organization, commonly called the Rotundanists, used to gather about one thousand strong in the "Rotunda" in Blackfriars Bridge Road, where they passed resolutions on various topics, and tumultuously cheered harangues by Benbow and "certain other more or less disreputable revolutionists."<sup>2</sup> In this forum Benbow spoke, sometimes as chairman, more often as sponsor or as seconder of a motion or resolution, at great length and with great discursiveness.<sup>3</sup> He almost always, however, took occasion first, to express impatience with dependence upon political reform, especially the Reform Bill — thus anticipating the present-day "direct action" school; second, more or less openly to advocate "resistance," even to the point of urging military organization and drill;<sup>4</sup> and, third, to mention repeatedly his project of a "national convention" and "national holiday."<sup>5</sup>

Benbow did not confine himself to revolutionary talk. On one occasion he "laid in a stock of heavy constables' staves, which he retailed at a few pence each to such members as desired to protect themselves against the police," in anticip-

house (Robinson, English Coffee Houses, London, 1893, p. 143), while Addison and Steele somewhat later pursued the same practice. (Cf. *Tattler*, No. 1.) That the "Commercial" would be an appropriate establishment from which to address a work of this kind is suggested by the fact that a dinner commemorating the birthday of Thomas Paine was held there in February, 1832, *Poor Man's Guardian*, February 7, 1832.

<sup>1</sup> Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, revised edition, New York, 1918, pp. 272-274. Place pronounced them "loud and long talkers, vehement, resolute, reckless rascals."

<sup>3</sup> The *Poor Man's Guardian* reports twenty-two speeches between September 3, 1831 and February 2, 1833.

<sup>4</sup> Under the disguise of "classes," modeled on the "Wesleyan" plan. He invited, indeed, old soldiers to join the "classes," and urged them to "teach their brethren military evolutions." *Poor Man's Guardian*, November 26, 1831.

<sup>5</sup> In one speech he seconded a motion calling for the liquidation of the Bank of England, and also took occasion to condemn the "funding system"; to state "that some of the autocracy had drawn immense sums out of the Bank and sent them abroad in case they might be driven from this country"; to accuse Wellington of being "half willing" to use the military "to put down the Unions, but let him try it"; to accuse Wellington of plotting with Metternich to import foreign soldiers "to dragoon us," and perhaps to burn London "like Moscow"; to express fear of soon being "immured in a dungeon"; to refer to "a General Congress of the People," and finally to close, amid "cheers," with a fervent appeal "to go forward in the common cause of 'Equal Rights and Equal Laws.'" *Poor Man's Guardian*, May 19, 1832.

pation of a demonstration which was postponed because of extensive counter preparations by the authorities.<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, he participated in a procession of 100,000 men, intended apparently as a sort of dress rehearsal for the "National Holiday." The parade clashed with the police, and Benbow suffered his third arrest, being acquitted, however, soon after.<sup>2</sup> By this time, he had achieved such notoriety as to be awarded a place in the columns of *Punch*, where he was called "mighty Benbow."<sup>3</sup>

For a time, Benbow entered the field of "radical" journalism, becoming editor and publisher of the *Tribune of the People*, which was to take up "a list of the principal subjects to be discussed and settled during our Congress," that is, the "Congress" which was to accompany the "National Holiday."<sup>4</sup> The paper seems to have run through only three issues, during June and July, 1832, and then to have been discontinued for financial reasons.<sup>5</sup> The material of the publication hardly fits with the promises made, and does not seem to vary materially from that appearing in other "radical" papers of the time. One article entitled "On the Right of Arming Oneself," and an editorial remark that the "Theobald's Road Institution promises fair to supersede the old dying Institution of St. Stephen's," serve to indicate the extremely revolutionary bent of Benbow's mind at the time.<sup>6</sup>

During this period, he had not altogether given up his vocation as a preacher, one sermon at least having been preached by him at the "Theobald's Road Institution."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wallas, op. cit., p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> London Chronicle, March 22, 1832; Poor Man's Guardian, May 19, 1832.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Poor Man's Guardian, April 14, 1832.

"Shadows this day have struck more terrors to the mind of Melbourne  
Than could the substance of ten thousand traitors  
All armed with pikes, and led by mighty Benbow!"

<sup>4</sup> Benbow, *Grand National Holiday*, London, 1832, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> June 17 and 24, and July 1. The Poor Man's Guardian for July 28, 1832 contains an advertisement signed by one R. E. Lee, accusing Benbow of having "victimized" Lee and of having resorted to "open robbery" in connection with his printing of the Tribune for Benbow. Lee announces a forthcoming pamphlet entitled "Benbowism Unmasked."

<sup>6</sup> Tribune of the People, July 1 and June 17, 1832.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., June 17, 1832, "On Sunday Evening, Mr. Benbow will preach a sermon."

As has been said, it was in the midst of these activities that Benbow published his *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*. The contents of this remarkable document have been ably summarized elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> and require only slight mention here. Briefly, it proposes that the working people declare a month's "holiday," supporting themselves from their savings the first week, but subsisting the remainder of the time by taking over parish funds, and by extorting "contributions" of money and food from the wealthy. It further proposes that local committees be appointed to maintain order and administer the distribution of food, and also to elect representatives to a national "congress" which is to "reform society." In modern terms, the people are to declare a general strike, expropriate property, and establish a new social order by means of a proletarian dictatorship.<sup>2</sup>

The height of Benbow's power and popularity seems to have coincided with the months following the publication of his pamphlet. In the face of the disillusionment following the passage of the Reform Bill, the National Union of Working-men rapidly lost prestige, and tho Benbow had never been optimistic concerning the measure, he seems to have suffered eclipse with his fellow "Rotundanists."<sup>3</sup> For a time, he was established as a "fruiterer."<sup>4</sup> Then after six years, he reappeared to play a minor part in the Chartist collapse to which his own ideas had largely contributed. Their faith in political action having been destroyed by the failure of Parliamentary reform and of the National Petition, the Chartist rank and file were more than ready to listen to the "physical force men"; the workmen in the North and Midlands were in a particularly rebellious mood.<sup>5</sup> Benbow's project for a National Holiday was discussed and ultimately adopted by the Chartist Convention. Apparently thinking the time ripe

<sup>1</sup> Beer, op. cit., pp. 316-318.

<sup>2</sup> That there was a clear "class war" doctrine in everything but name is patent in the literature of the time. Cf. Beer, op. cit., pp. 332-334; Wallas, op. cit., pp. 273, 274. Cf. also, Benbow, op. cit., pp. 1-8.

<sup>3</sup> Beer, op. cit., p. 320.

<sup>4</sup> Hovell, op. cit., pp. 143 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Robson's London Directory for 1837.

personally to advocate the adoption of his project, Benbow returned to the neighborhood of his youth, and traveled about in the vicinity of Manchester, "with horse and cart, holding open-air meetings, and pushing the sale of his pamphlet on the general strike."<sup>1</sup>

He was arrested on August 4, 1839, eight days before the date set for the "sacred month," and two days before the Convention lost courage and voted to "implore all our brother Chartists to abandon the project of a sacred month."<sup>2</sup> Eight months later, he was brought to trial for sedition at the assizes in Chester, found guilty, and sentenced to sixteen months imprisonment. Tho now fifty-six years of age, he does not seem to have lost any of his oratorical vigor, for he "entered on his defence at 11.40 & finished his speech at 10 o'clock P.M." The minute book of the assizes bears evidence that, possibly through his plea, or his advanced age, he moved the court to momentary clemency, for the record of the trial closes with the notation, "To enter into Recog-nisance," crossed out with a heavy red-ink line.<sup>3</sup>

Benbow faded out rapidly from the Chartist movement after this event. In 1840, apparently while still in prison, he sent to a meeting in Manchester a scheme for the reorganization of the movement which was "too long to be read,"<sup>4</sup> and, in April, 1841, on the eve of the expiration of his prison sentence, he appeared on Feargus O'Connor's list of the Chartists who "could be trusted."<sup>5</sup> No further information is available concerning him. It has been suggested that the vicissitudes of his life, and especially the strain of his self-tutelage, served gradually to unbalance a never wholly stable mind.<sup>6</sup> If this conjecture is correct, it is likely that the disappointment following the collapse of the sacred month, together with the rigorous treatment which he, as a Chartist,

<sup>1</sup> Beer, op. cit., vol. ii, p. 83. West suggests that Benbow had re-established himself as a shoemaker in Manchester, but gives no authority for his statement. West, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> Beer, op. cit., vol. ii, pp. 83 and 87.

<sup>3</sup> H. O. Assizes Book, 61/9 (Chester), April 10, 1840.

<sup>4</sup> Hovell, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Beer, op. cit., p. 314.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

would have received in prison<sup>1</sup> served to incapacitate him for further activity.

There remains to be considered the question as to how completely Benbow can be considered author of the general strike idea. Definite conclusions are impossible in the present imperfect state of knowledge concerning the man and his period. One point is, however, certain, namely, that a vague notion of a general strike as an aid to insurrection antedates Benbow's pamphlet by several years, going back to the days of the "Manchester Insurrection" and the Nottingham uprising.<sup>2</sup> The idea, however, seems to have remained nebulous and unheeded till Benbow (who, through his connection with these events, must certainly have noticed it) perceived its tremendous potentialities, and put it into the form which, except for phraseology, it retains substantially to this day.

One further point is of interest. The Sacred Month idea in Benbow's *National Holiday* is derived from an elaborate parallel drawn by the author of the pamphlet between his scheme and the ancient Jewish Sabbatical and Jubilee years.<sup>3</sup> As the Jubilee year involves such revolutionary proposals as the forgiving of debts and the nationalization and redistribution of land, the connection between the scriptural custom and Benbow's scheme is not so far-fetched as may at first seem. Furthermore, Benbow was a deeply religious man, and lived in a time when the Bible was looked to for literal guidance in current problems. It may be, therefore, that the development which this hitherto unnoticed idea reached in Benbow's fertile if ill-balanced mind seemed to him divinely sanctioned; so that the ardent persistence with which he advocated it was that of a religious fanatic as well as of a political and industrial agitator.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rosenblatt, *The Chartist Movement*, New York, 1916, p. 205; West, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Hammond, *op. cit.*, p. 358. The words "general strike" were used at this time.

<sup>3</sup> Benbow, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 9. Cf. *Leviticus*, xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. in this connection, Cazanian, *Le Roman Social en Angleterre*, Paris, 1903, pp. 199, 200, and Rose, *The Rise of Democracy*, London, 1897, p. 45.